

SEO Foundations: What WordPress Does and When You Need More

Facilitator Guide

Overview

Topic	SEO Foundations: What WordPress Does and When You Need More
Duration	60 minutes
Audience	Progressive beginner to intermediate — everyone can start in Part 1
Prerequisite	A WordPress site with at least a few posts or pages published
Environment	WordPress Playground with RankMath pre-loaded: no account or install needed
Materials	Device with a modern browser (Chrome, Firefox, Edge, or Safari) and internet access

⚠ **Version note:** Written for WordPress 7.0 and RankMath 1.x. Verify plugin steps against the current release before running. RankMath UI may change between versions. Release notes: rankmath.com/changelog | WordPress core releases: wordpress.org/news. WordPress 7.0 changes relevant to this activity: the default admin color scheme is now 'Modern' — a lighter, higher-contrast palette. RankMath configuration and all SEO features covered in this guide are unaffected by 7.0.

Learning Objectives

By the end of this activity, participants will be able to:

- * **Locate and verify the SEO features built into WordPress core without any plugin.**
- * **Evaluate whether their site needs an SEO plugin based on specific goals, not assumptions.**
- * Configure RankMath using the setup wizard to establish sensible site-wide defaults.
- * Write an optimized meta title and meta description for a post or page.
- * Identify their WordPress sitemap and understand how to submit it to Google Search Console.
- * Take one concrete action to improve their site's search visibility.

Green / bold = beginner entry point. All participants can achieve the first two objectives. Parts 3 and 4 build toward the intermediate objectives.

What Participants Need

- * A device with a modern web browser (Chrome, Firefox, Edge, or Safari)
- * An internet connection
- * The Playground environment: playground.wordpress.net — plain WordPress, no plugins. RankMath is installed by participants in Part 3.
- * Optional but valuable: access to a real WordPress site to check settings after the session

Note: Playground uses WebAssembly to run PHP in the browser. First load may take 10 to 20 seconds on slower connections.

Facilitator Setup Notes

- * Test the plain Playground URL before your session: playground.wordpress.net. Confirm no plugins are pre-installed.
- * Practice the RankMath install flow (Plugins > Add Plugin > search 'RankMath' > Install > Activate) so you can demo it smoothly in Part 3.
- * Open a browser tab to `/wp-sitemap.xml` in advance so you can demo it immediately.
- * Have Google Search Console open in a tab to show participants what submission looks like (even if you don't submit live during the session).
- * Review the Part 2 discussion prompts before the session — the facilitation quality of that discussion determines whether participants leave with genuine insight or just plugin config.
- * Playground runs entirely in the browser: no downloads, no admin passwords, no account creation needed.

Activity Steps

Total time: 60 minutes | Parts 1 to 4 + 5 min debrief

Part 1: What WordPress Already Gives You (15 minutes)

Start with plain WordPress. No SEO plugin is installed yet, and that's intentional. Participants need to see what core provides with fresh eyes before the Part 2 discussion asks them whether they need a plugin at all.

1. Open playground.wordpress.net in a new browser tab. Confirm the WordPress dashboard loads with no plugins listed in the sidebar.
2. Go to **Settings > Permalinks**. The default structure is **Day and name** — change it to **Post name** and click **Save Changes**. This gives you clean, keyword-rich URLs like `/my-post-title/` instead of `/2024/01/01/my-post-title/`.
3. Go to **Settings > Reading**. Confirm **Search engine visibility** is NOT checked. This is your site's sitewide on/off switch for search engine crawling.
4. In the Playground address bar, type `/wp-sitemap.xml` after the base URL. WordPress generates this sitemap automatically, no plugin required. It is updated every time you publish new content.
5. Go to **Media > Add Media File**. Upload any image. In the attachment details on the right, fill in the **Alt Text** field. Alt text helps search engines understand images and is required for accessibility.
6. Go to **Posts > Add New**. Write a short post with a clear, descriptive title and two or three sentences. Click **Publish**. WordPress opens a pre-publish confirmation panel — click **Publish** a second time to confirm. You will optimize this post in Part 4.

☐ **Facilitator tip:** After Step 4, pause and ask the room: "Did you know WordPress already had a sitemap? What did you expect to need a plugin for that's already here?" Give this moment space. It seeds the reflection in Part 2.

☐ **Facilitator tip:** Step 2 (Permalinks) is the single most impactful core SEO setting. Default WordPress installs use `/?p=123` style URLs which are meaningless to search engines. Post name structure produces clean, keyword-rich URLs like `/my-post-title/`. If a participant's live site is still on the default, fixing this today is a genuine win. Note: changing permalink structure on a live site with existing traffic requires setting up redirects from old URLs. Flag this so participants don't make the change without planning.

Part 2: Do You Actually Need a Plugin? (10 minutes)

This part has two phases: individual reflection (2 minutes), then a facilitated group discussion (8 minutes). The quality of this discussion is what separates participants who configure a plugin thoughtfully from those who install one and forget about it.

Individual Reflection (2 minutes)

Ask participants to think quietly about these three questions. They don't need to write anything down.

- * What are you trying to achieve with SEO on your site? More traffic? Better social sharing previews? Rich results for products or events?
- * Does your site have consistent, quality content published regularly? Or is the content foundation still being built?
- * Which specific gaps does your site actually have right now: custom meta descriptions, social sharing previews, schema markup, or redirect management?

Facilitated Group Discussion (8 minutes)

Opening prompt: "Who installed an SEO plugin before asking what it would do for them?" (Most hands will go up.) "What made you install it?"

Discussion beats to work through:

- * **Content first.** "If your main SEO problem is that you need more or better content, a plugin won't fix that. A green dot in a keyword analysis means your metadata is formatted correctly. It does not mean you will rank. Ranking comes from content that genuinely answers what people are searching for."
- * **The specific gaps.** Work through the four gaps WordPress core does not fill: custom meta descriptions, social sharing previews (Open Graph), schema markup for rich results, and redirect management. Ask: "Which of these does your site actually need right now? Not eventually, right now?"
- * **The right timing.** "The right time to install an SEO plugin is when you have a content foundation and you know which specific gap you need to close. Installing a plugin on day one of a site with no content is optimizing an empty shelf."
- * **Cognitive overhead.** "Every plugin setting is something you have to understand and maintain. A plugin that adds 40 configuration panels may create more confusion than clarity if you don't know what each setting does. Simpler is often better until you need more."
- * **Plugin selection.** "When you do decide you need a plugin, pick one that's actively maintained, doesn't slow your site down, and has a free tier that covers your actual needs. There are several strong options. Yoast SEO is the most widely recognized name and has a large support community. RankMath has a generous free tier and an excellent setup wizard that walks you through configuration step by step. SEOPress is a lightweight, privacy-focused option with no external requests or Google Fonts loaded. The SEO Framework is the leanest of the main options and makes sensible decisions automatically,

with minimal configuration required. Today we're using RankMath because its setup wizard is the best learning tool for a group session, but everything covered in Parts 3 and 4 has a direct equivalent in any of these plugins. The concepts transfer completely."

□ **Facilitator tip:** Close Part 2 with: "For today, we're going to use RankMath, not because everyone needs it, but because learning to configure it well helps you decide whether it's right for your site. If you leave today thinking you don't need a plugin yet, that's a completely valid outcome."

Part 3: Install RankMath and Run the Setup Wizard (15 minutes)

Participants are still in the same Playground session from Parts 1 and 2. The post published in Part 1 is still here and will be optimized in Part 4. Now we install RankMath as a deliberate choice, not a given.

□ **Note on plugin choice:** This activity uses RankMath because its setup wizard works well in a group setting. Every step in Parts 3 and 4 — install, setup wizard, meta title, meta description, sitemap, schema — is available on the free tier. No paid plan or license key is needed. Before participants install, acknowledge the alternatives: [Yoast SEO](#) is the most widely recognized option with a large support community. [SEOPress](#) is a lightweight, privacy-respecting choice with no external requests. [The SEO Framework](#) is the leanest option and configures sensible defaults automatically. All four plugins cover the same core concepts: meta titles and descriptions, sitemaps, schema markup, and Open Graph. The skills from today transfer directly.

⚠ **Account prompt:** During the wizard, RankMath will offer to connect a free RankMath account for analytics features. This is optional and the plugin works fully without it. Let participants know this is coming so it doesn't slow the group down: "You'll see a prompt to create a free account. Skip it for today — everything we're doing works without logging in."

1. Go to **Plugins > Add Plugin**. In the search field, type **RankMath**. Find **Rank Math SEO** in the results and click **Install Now**, then **Activate**.
2. After activation, click **RankMath** in the sidebar. You will land on a **Connect FREE Account** screen — click **Skip Step** at the bottom to proceed without creating an account. Next you will see the **Getting Started** screen with Easy, Advanced, and Custom Mode options. Select **Easy Mode** (recommended for this activity) and click **Start Wizard**.
3. **Wizard Step 1 — YOUR SITE:** Select your site type (Blog, News, Business, etc.). This sets the default schema.org type for your entire site, helping search engines understand what kind of site they're crawling.
4. **Wizard Step 2 — Analytics:** Skip for now. Connecting Google Search Console requires a verified live domain. Flag this as a take-home action for participants with live sites.
5. **Wizard Step 3 — Sitemap:** Leave enabled. RankMath's sitemap replaces the core sitemap with a more configurable version at `/sitemap_index.xml`.
6. **Wizard Step 4 — Optimization:** Review the defaults (redirects, image SEO, link suggestions). Accept the defaults for now and click **Save and Continue**.

7. Click **Finish Setup**. RankMath is now configured. The post from Part 1 is still in the dashboard, ready for Part 4.

□ **Facilitator tip:** Installing from the Plugin Directory mirrors what participants will do on their own sites. After activating, when the wizard opens, say: "This is part of why we chose RankMath. The setup experience is designed to make good decisions accessible without requiring you to research each setting independently." Run the wizard as a group, projecting your screen, and narrate each choice as you go.

□ **Facilitator tip:** Step 3 (Site type / schema): Worth explaining briefly. "Schema.org is a shared vocabulary that search engines use to understand content. When you tell RankMath your site is a blog, it marks up every post with Article schema. If you run a local business, it marks up your site with LocalBusiness schema. This is the structured data that enables rich results in Google search."

□ **Facilitator tip:** Step 4 (Search Console): For participants who do have a live site, connecting Search Console is the single highest-value post-session action. "Search Console shows you which queries bring people to your site, which pages are indexed, and any crawl errors. If you only do one thing after today, connect Search Console to your live site."

Part 4: Optimize a Real Post or Page (15 minutes)

1. Go to **Posts** and open the post you published in Part 1. If you didn't publish one, open the default Hello World post.
2. In the block editor top toolbar, find the RankMath score badges — they appear as **1/100** (SEO) and **0/100** (Readability). Click either badge to open the RankMath panel on the right.
3. Click **Edit Snippet**. This opens a modal dialog titled **Preview Snippet Editor** with fields for Title (with a character counter), Permalink, and Description.
4. Write a **meta title**: aim for up to 60 characters (RankMath shows a 45/60 style counter). Place your main keyword or topic near the front. This can be different from your post title.
5. Write a **meta description**: aim for 150 to 160 characters. Write for the human reader. This is your search result ad copy: the text that appears below your title in Google results.
6. Check the snippet preview at the top of the panel. Does it look like something you would click? Revise until it does.
7. Click **Update** to save.

□ **Facilitator tip:** Meta title vs. post title: the post title is what readers see on the page. The meta title is specifically for search engine results pages. They can and often should be different. A post titled "My thoughts on moving to Gutenberg" might have a meta title of "Switching to the Block Editor: What

I Learned After 6 Months."

□ **Facilitator tip:** Meta descriptions do not directly affect ranking position. They affect click-through rate: how many people click your result versus a competitor's result in the same position. A well-written description earns more traffic from the same ranking. Ask the room: "What makes a search result description worth clicking? What would make you skip it?"

□ **Stretch goal:** Faster participants can navigate to RankMath > Sitemap to view the enhanced sitemap and find the URL they would submit to Google Search Console.

Debrief and Discussion (5 minutes)

Discussion questions:

1. What one setting from Part 1 are you going back to check on your real site today?
2. After the Part 2 discussion: do you think your site needs a full SEO plugin right now, or are WordPress core's built-in features enough for where you are?
3. What would make a meta description compelling enough that you'd click it in search results?

The win: Today you discovered what WordPress already does for search engines, and found it's more than most people expect. You identified the specific gaps a plugin fills, made an informed decision about when to use one, and optimized a real post with a meta title and description. That's a more thoughtful approach to SEO than most sites ever take.

Next steps for participants:

- * [Submit your sitemap to Google Search Console](#)
- * [RankMath documentation and setup guides](#)
- * [Yoast SEO plugin \(alternative\)](#)
- * [SEOPress plugin \(lightweight alternative\)](#)
- * [The SEO Framework plugin \(minimal-config alternative\)](#)
- * [Learn WordPress: SEO Strategies \(Intermediate course\)](#)
- * [Learn WordPress: Advanced SEO Techniques Part 1](#)
- * [Learn WordPress: Advanced SEO Techniques Part 2](#)
- * [WordPress SEO documentation \(core features\)](#)
- * [Google PageSpeed Insights \(site speed is an SEO signal\)](#)

Sources

All URLs verified as of May 2026. Check before running the activity.

1. [WordPress SEO documentation](#): Core SEO features, permalinks, sitemaps, and meta tags. Primary reference for Part 1.
2. [SEO Strategies — Learn WordPress](#): Intermediate course lesson. Content strategy, keyword research, link building, mobile optimization.
3. [Unlocking Advanced SEO Techniques: Part 1 — Learn WordPress](#): Robots.txt, canonical URLs, XML sitemaps, meta titles and descriptions with plugin demo.
4. [Unlocking Advanced SEO Techniques: Part 2 — Learn WordPress](#): Structured data, schema markup, Open Graph protocol, SEO audits with Google Search Console.
5. [RankMath documentation](#): Official plugin documentation. Reference for setup wizard steps and feature configuration.
6. [Yoast SEO](#): Most widely recognized SEO plugin. Large support community and extensive documentation.
7. [SEOPress](#): Lightweight, privacy-focused alternative. No external HTTP requests or Google Fonts.
8. [The SEO Framework](#): Minimal-configuration alternative. Applies sensible defaults automatically with a lean footprint.
9. [Google Search Console](#): Submit sitemaps, monitor indexing, and track search performance. Priority take-home action.
10. [Google PageSpeed Insights](#): Page speed is a confirmed Google ranking signal. No plugin can substitute for a fast site.
11. [schema.org](#): The shared vocabulary for structured data used by Google, Bing, and Yahoo.